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THE PASSING SCENE

By WILLIAM S. WHITE

Our Backbiters in Viet Nam

The backbiters in South Viet Nam, whose general locale seems to be the American Embassy in Saigon, have gone to work again.

This time, their chosen victim is the officer who commands the 15,000-man American military force which is assisting the new government there in a desperate war against Communist invaders.

Leaks, apparently from embassy sources, picture Gen. Paul D. Harkins as out of favor with the new Viet Name regime, out of tune with Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and, generally, as more or less out of touch with everything. All this is deeply troubling and angering the highest officials of the American government here at home—not excluding President John F. Kennedy. It would not be exaggerating, one feels sure, to say that the President is doing, not a slow burn, but a fast one, indeed.

It is difficult to believe that Ambassador Lodge himself can be responsible for these attacks upon that vital human lynch-pin of this whole military operation who is Gen. Harkins. (They are attacks, by the way, remarkably reminiscent of earlier assaults-by-leak on some of our Central Intelligence Agency people out there.)

Lodge's Duty

Mr. Lodge is a thoroughly adult, decent and responsible politician who undertook a thankless task in Viet Nam as a patriotic duty. Still, whoever may be to blame, the Ambassador would be wise to put a stop at once to what looks here to be a clear effort to "get" Gen. Harkins because of his unashamed and entirely right and proper association with the old Viet Name regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, who was bloodily overthrown by a revolution of his subordinate generals only a little while ago.

For there is no disposition in the highest quarters here long to stomach another outbreak of back-stabbing, of girls' school jealousies and tale-bearing, within the American team in Viet Nam. Those within that team who were determined to see Mr. Diem fall have had their way and should now be satisfied.

Washington—whether to credit or discredit only events can show—stood by

and allowed him to be destroyed. That is to say, the arguments of the anti-Diem bloc within our team finally won out over those, notably including Gen. Harkins, who wanted to go on with him in the belief that his outfit was the best in sight to do the one true job. So won, too, the arguments at home of a clique of reformers and semi-pacifists who could never rest until Mr. Diem had been driven from the scene.

Get On With War

But at any rate, Mr. Diem is gone now—destroyed most of all on the claim that as a Christian convert he has been unduly repressive of Buddhism. What the administration wants to do now is to look strictly to the future, to draw our people in Viet Nam together into a truly common enterprise and to get on with the war. But we shall not, in fact, get on with the war until the sophomore-whispering gallery in Saigon is silenced and grown men begin to behave like grown men allied in good faith in the one purpose for which they were sent to Viet Nam. They have been sent there to fight marauding Communists, not to fight each other.

It is hardly the most hidden secret in Washington that this message, among others, is being carried by Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and the other VIPs assigned by the President to meet Ambassador Lodge and others in Honolulu on November 20. The general has acted as a good soldier should, and so far as this columnist can see he retains the full confidence of all the top people here, certainly that of the President.

But the real question, of course, is bigger even than the matter of unfairness to a first-rate military officer. It is this: Can Americans abroad never learn to play on the same side of the ball field? If the present set of Americans cannot, it is obvious that the President sooner or later must find another set who can. This is no place for bureaucratic intrigue; but it is surely a place where continued intrigue could destroy the most sensible strategy yet devised to halt creeping Communist aggression in Southeast Asia.

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Per 2 Paul D. HARKINS

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